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Exploring the Strategic Ground for Listening and Organizational Effectiveness

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Exploring the Strategic Ground for Listening and Organizational Effectiveness

Abstract

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Keywords

Strategic plan, learning organization, learning environment, listening, hospitality leadership, symbolic perspective

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Exploring the Strategic Ground for Listening and Organizational Effectiveness

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Abstract

This paper proposes that strategic plans are most likely to be implemented successfully when hospitality leaders listen well and when hospitality organizations develop strong learning environments. It is proposed that leaders who listen effectively can influence organizational processes at three levels of analysis – individual, team/interactional, and organizational. Examples are provided of the specific listening challenges hospitality leaders confront at each level. The HURIER model proposes a 6-stage listening process. A discussion then follows describing how listening skills can be applied to address the challenges posed at each of the three levels of analysis. It is argued that when leaders listen effectively they can create learning environments that then facilitate the implementation of the strategies they propose. When such organizational cultures are created and maintained, both employee empowerment and organizational performance are increased. Suggestions for increasing listening effectiveness are presented. A conceptual model is offered as a tool for identifying questions for future research.

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Exploring the Strategic Ground for Listening and Organizational Effectiveness

In the dynamic hospitality industry, skilled leaders increasingly focus their attention on creating strategies to accomplish organizational goals. The development of strategic plans, however, is only the first step; leaders must also successfully implement the plans they design (Knotter, 1996; Knotter & Cohen, 2002; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Kusy & McBain, 2000). As experience has repeatedly demonstrated, good ideas and carefully crafted strategic plans – the “what” of organizational effectiveness – are insufficient for those seeking to impact an organization’s future. Rather, a hospitality leader’s most difficult challenge is the “how” – the *implementation* of strategies that will keep the organization focused and competitive. In today’s dynamic service setting, we propose that effective listening is the key competence required for creating an environment that will facilitate the implementation of strategic plans (Argyris, 1999, 1993; Chang & Lee, 2007; Collins, 2005; Konczak, 2005).

Leaders as listeners recognize differences in employees’ interpretations of organizational events (over-booking or a kitchen accident) and work to create shared meanings. They understand both their employees and the specific hospitality environment in which they work. They develop a team spirit that facilitates the accomplishment of their action plans. Listening leaders also understand how to effectively use the organization’s communication channels to implement their strategies. When agile organizations are created and maintained, employees are likely to feel empowered and guests more satisfied (Chew, Cheng, & Petrovic-Lazarevic, 2006; Elkjaer, 2004; Knotter, 1996; Knotter & Cohen, 2002; Savolainen & Haikonen, 2007).

This paper unfolds in the following manner. First, the importance of strategic planning is emphasized. Three levels of organizational analysis are then used as a guiding framework in discussing the challenges to implementing strategic plans in hospitality environments. The concept of a learning organization is then presented and defined, and the requirements for creating a strong learning environment are outlined. The symbolic approach to understanding organizational activities is described and its usefulness highlighted.

The leader's role, and the critical need for listening competence, is then proposed and examined. The HURIER model of listening is described and, using this approach, the potential impact listening leaders have on creating responsive organizational environments is examined. The authors propose that listening is likely to facilitate the implementation of strategic plans on three levels – by better understanding the nature of the hospitality workforce, by addressing challenges created by the nature of hospitality work, and by making wise communication choices regarding the organization's channels and sources. It would seem, then, that leaders who listen effectively are well-positioned to address the challenges of the hospitality environment as they implement their strategic plans. Assuming this is the case, the paper concludes by suggesting ways to promote listening effectiveness and by offering a model that can be used to identify questions for future research on this topic.

Implementation of Strategic Plans

The importance of strategic planning in the hospitality industry is well documented (Harrison, 2003; Manderscheid & Kusy, 2005; Dulmanis, 2003; Ram & Geoffrey, 1999; Hughes & Beatty, 2005). Unfortunately, strategic plans are often poorly implemented and consequently important goals are not accomplished (Deloitte Consulting, 2007; Millett, 2006; Kaplan, 2005). In fact, some researchers estimate that as many as 9 of 10 strategic planning efforts fail, costing companies billions of dollars in labor (Speculand, 2006) as well as lost trust in the organization's leadership. Recent studies reveal that over one third of employees do not know where their organization is headed (Kaplan, 2005); related research provides convincing evidence that leaders regularly underestimate the challenge of implementing the strategies they develop (Mitchell, 2006; Mintzberg, 1994; Manderscheid & Kusy, 2005; Hwang & Lockwood, 2006; Ireland & Hitt, 1999).

The characteristics of hospitality organizations make implementing strategic plans particularly problematic. Increasing staff diversity, globalization, customer demographics and demands, workforce composition, environmental considerations, economic shifts, new technologies, natural disasters, and numerous other factors have the potential to affect hospitality organizations in unanticipated ways (Rusnak, 2006; Sullivan, 2004). Leaders who simply react to these events, rather than carefully designing

and executing a course of action, put their organizations at needless risk. It would seem useful, then, to examine several of the distinguishing characteristics of hospitality organizations that make the implementation of strategic plans particularly challenging and, we later argue, make the need for effective listening particularly acute.

Characteristics of Hospitality Environments

One commonly accepted approach to understanding organizational activity is to apply three levels of analysis believed to capture the range of considerations leaders address – individual, team, and organizational networks (Senge, 1990; Steiner, 1998). In preparation for our later discussions regarding how leaders facilitate learning environments through listening, we apply this three-tiered framework to examine elements of the hospitality workplace. In a later section, we discuss how leaders who listen effectively can influence variables at each phase.

Individual Level: The Hospitality Workforce

The hospitality workforce is one of the most difficult to recruit, motivate, and retain (Woods, 1997). Locations that are particularly desirable for business opportunities are often those where the supply of labor is limited and workers are unskilled (Wildes, 2005; Ronan, Garavan, O’Brian, & McDonnell, 2003). High turnover, due in part to the large percentage of temporary and part-time employees, also makes staffing difficult and traditional incentives less effective (Gunter, 2006; Quest, 2006; Smith, Gregory, & Cannon, 1996; Worsfold, 1999). In addition, employee diversity, while holding tremendous potential for competitive advantage, is often poorly managed (Caldeira, Fernandez, & Wood, 2004; Prewitt, 2000; Berta, 2002).

Language barriers, lifestyle differences, and value clashes are more likely to occur when the workforce is diverse. Employees enter the organization with different needs, assumptions, and expectations about the nature of work and their role in the organization’s operation (Ballance, 2006; Caldeira et al., 2004; Raso, 2006). Employee satisfaction and commitment becomes increasingly difficult when individuals feel underrepresented or misunderstood. Gender issues have also been widely studied (Knutson & Schmidgall, 1999; Nelson, 1990; Shinew & Arnold, 1998), particularly in foodservice

operations. Several researchers have referred to the dynamic of such male-dominated departments as “sexualized” environments where women, in particular, have traditionally struggled to gain recognition and respect (Woods & Viehland, 2000; Gutek, Cohen, & Konrad, 1990; Hicks, 1990).

Activities Level: The Hospitality Workplace

When we change our lens and focus on the way in which employees work together to accomplish tasks, we find that the nature of work in hospitality organizations is dynamic and unpredictable. Unanticipated changes, from hurricanes to canceled weddings, make the development and implementation of strategic plans particularly critical but also particularly complicated. Long hours and irregular work schedules – often including weekends and holidays – make stress and burnout all too common (Harris, Artis, Walters, & Licata, 2006). Crises routinely consume a high percent of employees’ time as they strive to meet the large and small emergencies that arise.

Conflicting priorities and lack of shared information among departments results in poor team functioning. The housekeeping staff and front desk employees, members of the sales and banquets departments, all benefit from planned and spontaneous communication as well as informal dialogue with coworkers. Knowledge transfer is blocked if opportunities are not deliberately created for regular information sharing (Eisenberg, Andrews, & Murphy, 1999; Ford, 1999; Lewis, 1999). As Mitchell (2006) emphasizes, there is often a lack of integration which makes collective action nearly impossible.

Recently, guests themselves have contributed to the complexity of hospitality work. As competition increases and marketing becomes more aggressive, customer expectations regarding the experience they expect to receive increases as well (Ford & Heaton, 2001; Varoglu & Eser, 2006). A public suffering from personal stress and looking forward to enjoying the promises of comfort, service, and personalization, is becoming less tolerant of unfulfilled expectations. In fact, some researchers argue that satisfying customers’ expectations is no longer sufficient; guests expect to be “delighted” by the service they receive (Cohen, 1997; Torres & Kline, 2006). As travelers visit other countries for both business and vacation purposes, adapting to international guests becomes yet another concern. Service

employees are undoubtedly finding that satisfying customers is an increasingly challenging task (Purves, 2007; D'Annunzio-Green, 2002; Davis, 2005).

Organizational Level: Communication Networks

Information does not automatically flow through an organization; when it does, it is often distorted and incomplete. While hospitality organizations are not unique in their frequent failure to capture and tap into informal networks, the fast pace of events and the demand for coordination make them one of the most challenging.

The very nature of hospitality environments that cause them to be dynamic and unpredictable also work to keep employees focused on a set of well-defined tasks, procedures, and operating standards to ensure consistency and quality. Time for reflection and planning is minimal as employees address pressing issues on a continuously full plate of demands, whether fulfilling complicated requests or recovering from service breakdowns (Berger & Merritt, 1998; Eary & Allison, 2002; Enz, 2001; Kelly & Kelly, 1994).

In larger hospitality organizations it is not unusual for employees – particularly line staff – to admit they have never seen their general manager and cannot describe the organization's mission. Without systems carefully designed to facilitate information flow, the sharing of plans and ideas is limited. In this regard, hospitality organizations have been among the last to recognize the value of flatter, team-based organizational structures that reduce barriers to knowledge transfer (Overholt, 1997; Fulk, 2001).

Creating a Learning Environment

What organizational conditions can be created to ensure the greatest potential for success in implementing strategic plans? One way that leaders can “ready” their employees to implement new strategies is by encouraging the characteristics of what theorists have called a learning organization (Tranfield, Duberley, Smith, & Stokes, 2000; Henderson & McAdam, 2003; Ellinger, Watkins, & Bostrom, 1999; Hawkins, 2005). One approach to understanding learning organizations and related variables of concern is through a symbolic perspective. We propose that leaders who focus on effective

listening are best able to establish learning environments and are subsequently in the best position to implement the strategic plans that will facilitate high performance.

Learning organizations have been defined in a number of ways (Yeo, 2004, 2005; Frahm & Brown, 2006). All share a common theme of encouraging employees to challenge what and how things are done. Focus is on the continuous transfer of knowledge, which increases the resources available to solve organizational problems and make effective decisions (Cornett, 1998; Sinkula, 1994). Through this activity, information becomes widely shared among organizational members (Braham, 1996; Murray, 2002) and hospitality leaders have a responsive environment in which to introduce and implement their strategic plans.

As knowledge moves through the organization it increases employees' confidence, reassuring them that things will go well and increasing their self-efficacy (Henderson & McAdam, 2003). When there is continuous information sharing, every employee becomes a valued team member (Frahm & Brown, 2006; Cummings & Huse, 1996; Harung, Heaton, & Alexander, 1999).

Success in establishing continuous knowledge transfer – the basic process in creating a learning environment – depends upon employees' perceptions of one another and the nature of the relationships they establish (Lucas & Ogilvie, 2006). Learning is not something that is done “to” employees (Small & Irvine, 2006; Marvin & Cavaleri, 2004; Moilanen, 2001); leaders, no matter how skilled, cannot make employees learn. Rather, learning is a voluntary process dependent upon each employee's perceptions and subsequent interpretations of organizational messages and activities.

A Symbolic Approach to Understanding the Learning Environment

At the heart of the symbolic perspective is the premise that meanings are continuously being created and shared and, in doing so, individuals develop common understandings as they expand their knowledge base (Bogenrieder, 2002; Boud & Middleton, 2003; Kim, 1993). Keep in mind that employees interpret organizational events based on their past experiences, values, beliefs, attitudes, and other individual factors. A “holiday party,” a “difficult guest,” or an “email reminder” has different meanings to different individuals. The more diverse the workforce, the greater the chances are that

various policies and practices will be interpreted differently. Employees are in a constant process of making sense of their workplace experiences in light of their unique perceptual frameworks (Weick, 2005).

Over time, sense-making activities enable employees to align their understandings and expectations so that a shared culture develops. This culture then shapes individuals' behaviors and assumptions and serves as a framework for interpreting new and unfamiliar events (Schein, 1996, 1985; O'Reilly and Chatman, 1996). Ultimately, we believe that when listening is valued, leaders are best able to develop a culture that supports continuous information sharing and planned change (Franklin, 2000).

The Leader's Role in Developing a Learning Environment

A leader's vision remains unrealized unless he or she influences the organization's culture (Buckler, 1996; Harrison, 1993; Bingham, 2006). While an array of competencies are involved in leadership effectiveness (Chung-Herrera, Enz, & Lankau, 2003; Lustri, Miura, & Takahashi, 2007), we propose that listening is the most central and one of the most neglected.

Recall our earlier proposition that the strategic plan itself – the “what” of leadership influence – can only be realized if process concerns – the “how” of implementation – are addressed. We have further suggested that leaders who develop learning environments in preparation for implementing their strategic plans have a clear advantage (Cornett, 1998; Marquardt, 2002). The following section provides an overview of how listening can be approached as a tool for influencing organizational culture and the implementation of strategic plans. We then address hospitality related challenges at each of the three levels presented earlier and argue that effective listening can reduce or contribute to overcoming these concerns.

Listening as a Leader's Core Competence

It appears that few leaders have developed listening as a core competence, or chosen to focus on listening improvement for their employees. We hypothesize that this is not because they aren't convinced of the value of listening behavior – indeed, listening ability is increasingly linked to service excellence,

vendor partnerships, and other hospitality relationships (Goby & Lewis, 2000; Steil & Brommelje, 2004). Rather, listening's taken-for-granted, intangible nature makes it difficult to develop through traditional methods (Golen, 1990; Rhodes, Watson, & Barker, 1990; Sypher, Bostrom, & Seibert, 1989). While good listeners and poor listeners can readily be distinguished,] the path from acceptable to outstanding remains more complicated.

Recent thinking about the communication process has moved from traditional sender-receiver models to a relational approach (Clampitt, 2004; Eisenberg & Goodall, 2001). From this perspective, which is compatible with the organizational learning process discussed earlier, effective communicators are always listening – even as they speak. To facilitate shared meanings, individuals must continuously engage in the listening process, picking up cues from their partners as well as from the environment. Effective listeners need to understand the meanings others have assigned to given events or activities. Then, when speaking, listeners continue to adapt their messages as they observe and process the continuous verbal or nonverbal feedback.

Scholars have found that listening is particularly valued by those just entering hospitality organizations as they make sense of new activities and service practices. Senior executives, who must gather information from numerous sources and then make decisions about how to respond, also benefit significantly from listening competence (Brownell, 1994). It is not surprising that listening is of particular value in hospitality organizations where employees interact with both internal and external customers.

A Behavioral Model of Listening

Recognizing the need for a more behavioral approach to listening improvement, Brownell's (2006, 1994a, 1994b) research led to the development of the HURIER listening model (Figure 1). Her framework identifies six distinct but interrelated listening skill clusters and allows individuals to focus on those components that are most related to their workplace needs. Further, the model accounts for the impact of individual variables such as attitudes, values, past experiences, gender, and age as well as elements of the context that may influence a listener's choices. Components of the model are briefly described below as they contribute to a leader's ability to facilitate information sharing (and the

subsequent implementation of strategic plans). This description of the listening process provides a background for later discussion.

(1) *Hearing*: The first step in listening effectiveness is for leaders to “hear,” or focus attention, on the “right” things. Unless leaders pay attention to the events and messages that matter, their listening efforts will be futile (Weick, 2006). Effective listeners notice when front desk employees are upset and frustrated about a new computer system or when servers are working too many hours. Leaders who filter messages effectively can sit in the employee cafeteria and pick out the critical conversations that suggest why employees might be confused or anxious.

Hearing is influenced by both external and internal factors. While it is relatively easy to manage distractions in the environment – to deliberately reduce interruptions and confusion – it is more challenging to control fatigue, stress, and other personal variables that make concentration on important verbal and nonverbal messages difficult. Progressive hospitality organizations continuously emphasize the importance of maintaining wellness and balance for high performance.

(2) *Understanding*: This component of the listening process addresses employees’ comprehension of the literal meaning of what they hear. This activity is not as easy as it may appear – especially when the workforce is diverse or when departments have developed specialized vocabularies.

Second language speakers are likely to have difficulty determining the exact meaning of what is said to them. This often reduces both their participation in workplace activities and their self-efficacy. Listening leaders recognize where such miscommunication occurs and initiate actions to reduce such problems. In the US, for instance, a largely Hispanic housekeeping staff would appreciate pictures to accompany written directions; perhaps the Italian reservations manager can be made more comfortable so that she doesn’t hesitate to ask when she has questions about what was said; perhaps older employees working on the bell staff need the background music turned down so that they can hear guests’ requests more clearly.

The development of a learning environment depends on participants' ability to process layers of meaning and to recognize unstated assumptions. Leaders can facilitate this process by taking steps to ensure that literal meanings are accurately understood.

(3) *Remembering*: In hospitality environments, in particular, the need for remembering is critical. Guests expect that their names will be used, diners expect that their orders will be accurate and their preferences noted. Effectiveness in attending to the daily details of a service environment depends upon a well-developed memory system.

Remembering is an important component of how employees perceive a leader's listening (Bostrom&Waldhart, 1988; Johnson&Bechler, 1998).When hotel employees were asked if their manager "listened" to them, many complained that while she seemed to understand and care about their concerns, nothing happened – there was no follow up or implementation as promised. Culture leaders also build on the past, reminding all employees of the stories and traditions that define the organization's core competencies and best practices. Remembering and recognizing accomplishments, large and small, has a significant impact on morale. It also increases employees' self-efficacy which, in turn, promotes higher performance (Steil & Brommelje, 2004).

(4) *Interpreting*: Learning environments only develop when employees share meanings – that is, accurately interpret the messages they receive. Interpreting messages requires that listeners consider a range of cues to determine their partner's intentions. Contextual and nonverbal dimensions lend particular insight in this regard (Boyatzis & Van Oosten, 2003; Druskat & Wolff, 2001). Although listeners can only hope to approximate the intended meanings, the more similar and familiar the communicators are the more likely it is that shared understandings are created.

Leading a diverse workforce that serves international guests is particularly challenging, then, as we are reminded that past experiences, values, expectations, and assumptions may vary dramatically from one culture to the next. With high employee diversity, leaders are challenged to provide a common foundation of experience. Once organizational members have solved problems together, overcome

challenges as a team, and celebrated their accomplishments, they begin to develop a shared culture from which to create further bonds and align their expectations.

Empathy, understanding what messages mean from the employee's point of view, is a particularly important component of interpreting messages. In listening to the issues and challenges reported by each member of the Executive Team, for instance, empathic leaders view the situation from multiple perspectives. Empathy creates a supportive climate where all participants can focus on joint problem solving (Becker, 2003; Lei & Greer, 2003).

(5) Evaluating: Leaders constantly make judgments about the ideas and proposals that come to their attention, often serving as gatekeepers in filtering important from less critical issues. Effectiveness in this dimension requires withholding evaluation until a message has been completely understood. Fast-paced hospitality environments tempt employees to jump to conclusions or to make unwarranted assumptions in seeking the most direct path to a solution. Excellent listeners make sure they have complete and accurate information before making a decision.

In addition, effective listeners recognize their own agendas and biases and how their past experiences and personal values influence their response. While everyone is affected by individual filters, acknowledging them before a decision is made demonstrates an awareness of the variables that affect important choices (Kotef, 2006). Identifying emotional appeals or asking for evidence to support generalizations increases everyone's confidence in the outcome. Leaders who base their decisions on fact and strive to be fair and impartial ultimately benefit from greater trust and respect. Leaders who are perceived as trustworthy and who demonstrate behavioral integrity facilitate information sharing (Simons, 2002; Fernandez, 2003).

(6) Responding: Employees assess the quality of a leader's listening by the nature of his or her response. Often, leaders are unaware of the nearly unlimited options they have to either hinder or facilitate information exchanges. Those interested in creating learning environments encourage information sharing by responding to what they hear in ways that promote openness and dialogue. Research has found that hasty judgments, too much advice, discounts, and other negative responses are

likely to derail efforts to engage and empower a diverse hospitality workforce (Ford, 2006; Bakker, Leenders, Gabbay, Kratzer, & Van Engelen, 2006).

Increasing Listening Competence

Listening competence can be improved organization-wide by focusing on specific components of the behavioral HURIER model. For instance, understanding is facilitated by providing non-native speakers with the resources they need to accomplish their jobs. Increasing awareness of how specialized, department-specific vocabularies – from Food and Beverage to Housekeeping – inhibit the creation of shared meanings can also improve understanding.

Emotional and cultural intelligence are becoming increasingly important to hospitality practitioners, especially when the workforce is diverse and customers are increasingly international. Leaders who accurately interpret messages recognize how the workplace itself impacts employee perceptions and behavior. Greater sensitivity to nonverbal and other indirect cues can also be developed through training sessions, coaching, and mentoring practices. Leaders who identify and work to eliminate instances of stereotyping or other forms of bias that inhibit information sharing also contribute to a learning environment.

Leaders themselves demonstrate that they value listening by serving as a role model and by rewarding and reinforcing employees who listen well. Including listening competence as a requirement in employee selection and addressing listening effectiveness in performance appraisals send important messages about its value. Leaders who participate in the daily activities of their staff, rather than spending the majority of their time behind closed office doors, are in the best position to analyze and address employee and guest needs.

The following section provides examples of how such leaders might begin to address the listening challenges of the hospitality workplace.

Listening Solutions to Hospitality Leadership Challenges

Earlier we proposed that learning environments could be analyzed on three levels – individual-based, interaction-based, and organization-based. Here, we suggest how a leader who listens well can

broadly address hospitality challenges at each of these levels (Figure 2). Ultimately, the leader's goal is to facilitate the implementation of strategic plans by encouraging knowledge transfer.

Implementation Challenge #1: Nature of the Hospitality Workforce

Listening at the individual level demonstrates to employees that they are recognized and valued. Giving “voice” to service workers has been recognized as a key leadership task; effective listening helps to set the stage for full employee participation and empowerment (Conger & Kanungo, 1988).

Listening helps leaders recognize the variations in how individuals from different cultures and with very different life experiences see organizational events and respond to policies and practices. Rather than focusing on “telling”, leaders who value listening are concerned with better understanding how each employee views the situation. Once employees' perspectives are better understood, leaders can make appropriate choices about how to motivate and retain their staff. Given the high hospitality industry turnover, focusing on employees' unique needs has had a significant positive impact on retention and performance (Bowen, 1997; Dreachslin, 2007).

Heightened sensitivity to the effect taken-for-granted practices and policies have on non-native members can help create a more supportive and inclusive environment in which all employees feel they have something to contribute. For instance, differences in the meanings of such concepts as “on time”, “quality service”, “professional,” and so forth can be the source of on-going frustration.

Rather than assuming that all employees are motivated to work toward higher salaries, leaders who listen obtain as much information as possible about each individual's values and priorities before determining the most effective way to reward performance. While native Islanders might be working only until they have enough money to sustain them for several weeks, alternative benefits – such as child care or transportation – might encourage them to make a more long term commitment.

When the labor pool allows for careful selection, leaders who listen attentively to applicants are better able to determine person-organization fit. Finding individuals to handle the increasing demands of sophisticated customers and the unexpected crises of daily activities – what has been termed “adaptive behavior” – is an on-going challenge (Vilnai-Yavetz & Rafaeli, 2003). Creating selection practices that

assess the values that are critical to a service-oriented learning organization – flexibility, open mindedness, and positive attitude, for instance, can greatly reduce turnover and facilitate the implementation of continuous improvement processes (Berger & Brownell, 2006).

Implementation Challenge #2: The Nature of Hospitality Work

While listening to individual employees establishes the foundation for on-going information transfer, attention to the interaction and organizational levels is also critical. The impact of listening on team performance and organizational culture cannot be underestimated. When employees feel “heard” and when leaders are responsive to individual needs, employees are likely to be more involved, committed, and consequently more receptive to new ideas and plans.

When leaders listen well, they promote a learning environment where employees work together to solve problems, explore options, and increase the organization’s knowledge base. The spatial environment as well as established routines, systems, and policies, all influence employees’ perceptions of their work (Henderson & McAdam, 2003). Creating common public areas for dialogue, providing accessible water coolers and bulletin boards, and publicizing employee accomplishments all facilitate regular information sharing.

As discussed earlier, culture is created as employees go about their daily activities. When leaders listen, they contribute to an environment that supports continuous change and encourages employees to seek ways of improving their current practices. Risk-taking, so essential to learning and change, only occurs when employees feel free to acknowledge and confront workplace dilemmas.

There is strong agreement among scholars and practitioners alike that the role of a culture leader involves modeling the behavior desired of organizational members, and listening is no exception (Brownell, 1994b). When listening becomes part of a strong culture, employees are better prepared to address the needs of customers and guests as well. Stories and myths develop that clearly communicate the importance of team effort and reinforce service values.

We propose that through a high level of listening competence, leaders demonstrate to their employees that it is not only safe, but essential, to share information, explore options, and to continuously

improve. This activity facilitates the final stage required to create an environment where employees are most likely to be receptive to strategic plans – the organizational level.

Implementation Challenge #3: Implementing Through Organizational Networks

A hospitality organization's structure impacts how information travels and how readily employees can develop shared understandings. Leaders have nearly unlimited options regarding their choice of communication channels; that is, how they communicate information. Memos, bulletin boards, meetings, phone conversations, email, web pages, brochures, instant messaging, and informal conversations are just a few of the numerous options. Frequently, knowledge transfer practices develop from convenience rather than based on an understanding of how employees seek and use the information they receive.

A recent study of how hospitality employees come to understand what “quality service” means, provides a vivid example (Brownell & Jameson, 1996). Leaders were frustrated with their inability to create a shared vision of service quality as it was translated throughout various departments. They had spent thousands of dollars developing training programs, brochures, and handbooks to communicate quality service standards. When a survey was given to employees asking what sources and channels they used to gain information about issues of quality, the employee response came as a surprise to senior planners. Non-native speakers did not seek the same sources and channels as those whose first language was English. Women had slightly different preferences than their male colleagues. The majority of employees indicated that they depended heavily on their supervisor to provide feedback to them on the job. They described instances where they learned the most important lessons by observing fellow employees who responded effectively to the crises and solved the dilemmas that arose. Did they learn from training seminars? Hardly at all. Did they understand the information in the Handbook? No one had read it.

Such disconnects are not uncommon. Leaders who listen to their employees, however, are in a position to align internal communication strategies – both sources and channels – with employee preferences. This ensures that important messages reach their intended audiences and facilitates the

central component of a learning organization, continuous flow of information throughout the system.

Learning environments can only be established if leaders are aware of how to deliberately use formal and informal communication networks to create shared understandings.

Implications for Future Research

We have proposed that articulating a vision and creating a strategic plan is only the first step toward planned change. To realize their strategies, we argue that leaders must address the challenges of implementation. We have suggested that the context most likely to facilitate planned change is a learning environment characterized by openness, knowledge transfer, and shared meanings. We have further proposed that listening is the critical leadership competence in accomplishing this task. Leaders as change agents recognize emerging employee practices and partner with employees in creating and maintaining information-sharing activities. This perspective suggests a number of directions for future research.

Researchers who seek to better understand listening and its impact on organizational processes confront a number of challenges. Lack of a common theoretical framework has prevented the development of a vigorous research stream. The interdisciplinary nature of listening behavior further contributes to the fragmentation in how it has been approached as a subject of study. In addition, the covert nature of the listening process prevents it from being readily observable and easily quantified. Consequently, few studies have contributed to our understanding of the impact listening has on the hospitality workplace.

If we adapt the model presented earlier, however, we find that research questions might be posed at each of the three levels of analysis (Figure 3). The first question becomes, “How well do employees in this organization listen?” While perceptions of listening effectiveness are a critical factor in organizational contexts, multiple evaluation instruments (Bostrom & Waldhart, 1983; Brown & Carlson, 1995; Watson & Barker, 1991) are also available to assess listening behavior on standardized scales. If listening instruction was provided to a random sample of employees, it would be useful to assess the impact of this intervention not only on listening test scores but also on subsequent behavior. Researchers

would find it useful to ask whether listening effectiveness is related to the key variables discussed in this paper, such as levels of employee loyalty (intent to stay) and clarity of job expectations.

At the level of workplace activities and team dynamics, researchers might profitably explore such questions as whether perceptions of listening effectiveness or listening assessment scores are correlated with team variables such as cohesiveness, decision making practices, and member satisfaction with team outcomes. It might also be useful to know whether perceptions of listening are correlated with the degree of member participation in team processes. It is likely that other workplace activities, from event planning to front desk encounters, are influenced by perceptions of listening effectiveness.

Studies that focus on service delivery, both internal and external, would provide additional value to hospitality leaders. Customization of the service experience requires employee adaptive behavior. To what extent is listening involved in the service employee-customer exchange? To what extent can adaptive behavior be taught, and how do employees approach listening in cross-cultural interactions?

Finally, there are many organization-level questions that could be posed, and responses would help hospitality leaders create learning environments that facilitate information flow. Studies might determine the extent to which individuals in different departments share common understandings of organizational messages. Assessing the degree to which effective listening enables leaders to adapt messages to various employee groups, or to effectively communicate the organization's vision and values, would also be useful. As noted earlier, little research has been conducted to determine the impact listening behavior has on organizational communication and subsequent performance.

Conclusion

While countless competencies have been proposed as critical to leadership effectiveness, we posit that few have as much potential as listening to facilitate the implementation of strategies for planned change. Researchers who study listening in hospitality contexts may generate findings that will assist in developing the next generation of hospitality leaders. Educators and trainers who focus on hospitality leadership development may discover that the results of studies on listening competence guide their efforts to improve leadership effectiveness.

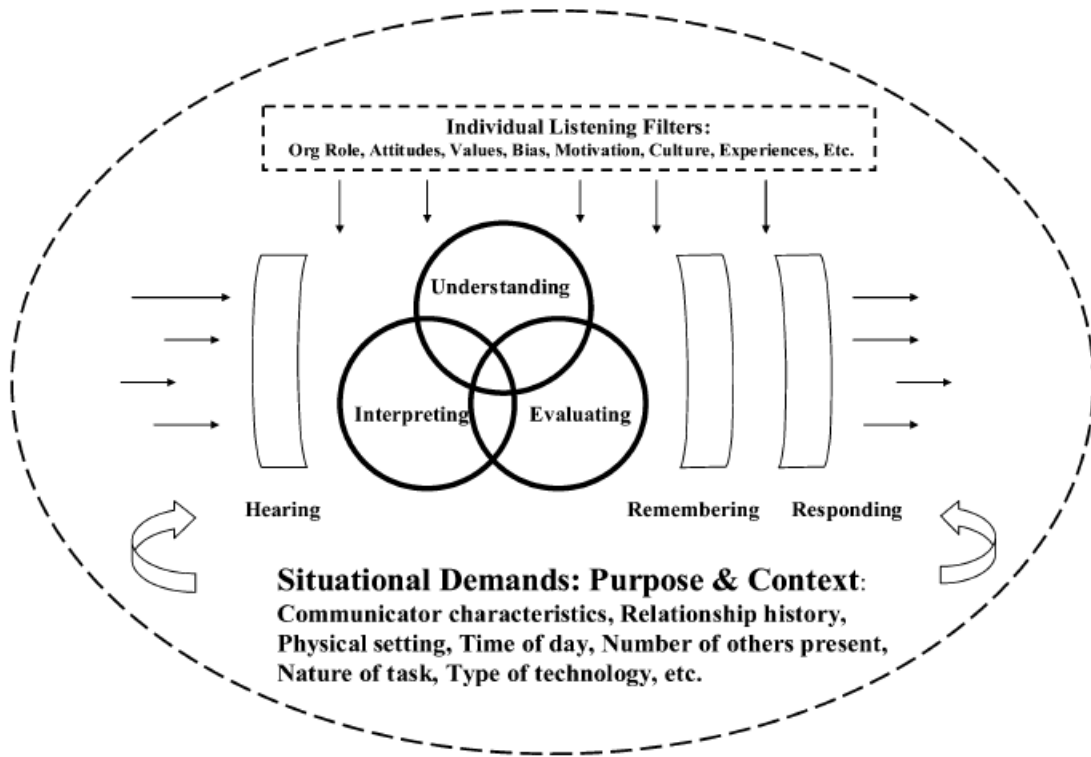


Figure 1. The HURIER Listening Model: Facilitating a Learning Environment (adapted from Brownell, 2006, p. 17).

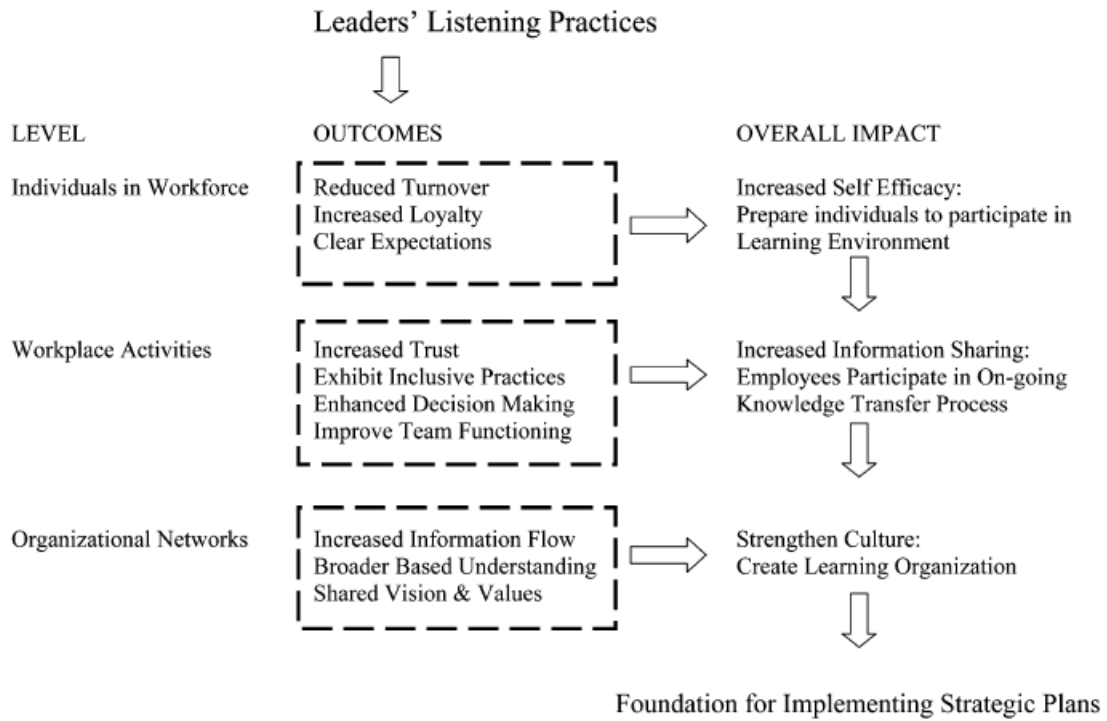


Figure 2. Effect of leaders' listening on the implementation of strategic plans



Figure 3. Listening research and hospitality practice.

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